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AUTHOR Gibbs, Jeanne M.
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ABSTRACT

Research has indicated that times of great personal loss are usually eased by the presence of a close individual. Widowhood research, however, has shown a lack or brevity of close social support for the widow. The frequency and quality of the significant other relationships of older widows were explored after the initial period of grief and bereavement. Personal, in-depth interviews were conducted with 40 women, widowed at least one year, and from one to three of their significant others residing in the same community. Widows (N=20) lived in a small town and 20 lived in a rural community. A comparison of results from the two communities indicated that the widow's social world in the town tended to be built around friends, while the rural widow's social world tended to be more family-oriented. The widows only identified other women as their significant others although they were given the opportunity to name either men or women, including family members. The findings suggest that greater feelings of emotional closeness and social contact occur between the widow and her significant other after widowhood. The results also reaffirm the importance of non-family significant others in the widow's efforts at social adaptation to a new role. (Author/NRB)

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Significant Other Relationships: Their Location and Importance For the Older Widow[1]

Jeanne M. Gibbs, Ph.D.

Institute of Gerontology

The University of Michigan-Wayne State University

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Running Head: The Older Widow and Her Significant Others

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In her autobiographical account of widowhood, Clarissa Start (1968) recounts with disappointment and irony that "grief teaches you that there are two kinds of people in the world, those who are available and those who are not" (p. 124). Recently, greater attention has been given to the importance of social support following the loss of a loved one (Simos, 1979; Glick, et al., 1974). The general findings indicate that times of great personal loss are usually eased by the presence of a close individual who serves as a confidant or significant other (Simos, 1979; Silverman, 1974).

Widowhood research has indicated a brevity of, and in some cases, a lack of close or intimate support (Silverman, 1974; Glick, et al., 1974). Additionally, close or intimate social support for the older widow has received very little attention (Gibbs, Note 1) and the relationship as perceived by both the widow and her significant other has not been examined.

Usually either of two reasons account for the lack, or brevity, of close social support for the widow. First, is the lack of information and, oftentimes, misinformation concerning the dynamics of grief and bereavement. A general stereotype of bereavement has it that it is of a much shorter duration than what is truly the case in most instances. The general notion is that in a few weeks most grief reactions are dissipated to the point where the widow no longer needs close or intimate socio-emotional support. Secondly, there is the reality that those who would fill the position of a significant other for the widow, such as children, other family members, and certain close friends must return to their regular life routines.

Often, grown children with families must return to their own family and work duties as much as they would like to stay and help their widowed mother. Thus, it may be necessary for confidantes to come from outside the widow's family but from within her community of residence.

The perceived salience of non-family relationships has been previously observed in widowhood (Gibbs, 1978). It has also been recognized that support for the widow is necessary beyond the first year of bereavement (Lopata, 1979) and that the importance of non-family support networks are beneficial for the older widow (Gibbs, Note 1). Non-family significant other relationships are thus an important area for inquiry particularly in view of greater family mobility and dispersion and at present when formal, professional, social supports may not be available or are diminishing because of depressed economic circumstances.

Thus, this study addresses the perceived and actual importance of the significant others relationships of the non-metropolitan older widow after one year or more of widowhood. While it was anticipated that rural vs. urban non-metropolitan community structure would affect the nature of social support between the two community research sites, no formal hypotheses regarding community differences were made due to the exploratory nature of the study. Demographic characteristics of the widows and the significant others are presented as well as the nature and frequency of social interactions of the significant other with the widow. The relationships between the frequency of specific social interactions and the significant other's feelings of emotional closeness for the widow are analyzed.

Further, an index of agreement and difference of means test between the widows and their significant others' ratings of intimacy are presented.

Method

The significant other relationships of 40 older widows residing in two non-metropolitan communities were examined. Information about these relationships was ascertained from both the significant other and the widow.

The data were collected in two non-metropolitan Kansas communities during 1978: (1) a non-metropolitan small town with a population of approximately 34,000; and (2) a rural non-metropolitan community with a population of less than 1,000. In-depth, standardized, interviews were administered personally to a non-random sample of 20 older widowed women living in each community. In addition to data obtained from the widows, an attempt was made to look at the widow's social life from the perspective of her closest, most significant friends, those who lived in the same community and shared day-to-day interactions with her.

In both communities, lists of widows were compiled with the aid of knowledgeable community informants, e.g., women's club officers, county extension agent, older adult club leaders. Respondents who agreed to participate in the project were interviewed for general background information, basic demographic and life cycle data, housing and living arrangements, health status and history, educational and work history, information about significant others and perceptions of emotional closeness to significant others. The widow was asked to name from one to three significant others and for her consent to their being interviewed. The "significan

other" was defined to the widow as her "close, significant friend with whom she felt she could confide" and who also lived in the same community.

In the small town, fifty-three significant others (an average of 2.65) were named by the widows. Fifty-two of these were interviewed; one who was too ill to be interviewed at the time died shortly thereafter. In the rural community, thirty-one significant others (an average of 1.05) were named by the widows. Thirty of these were interviewed, with the other refusing on the grounds of not wishing to participate in the study. (It should be noted that five of the rural community widows declined to name any significant others).

Sample Characteristics

The widowed respondents were Caucasian, 50 years old or older, widowed at least one year or more and not yet remarried. Age range of the larger community sample was from 55 to 94 years with a mean of 74.7. Age range of the rural community sample was from 60 to 90 years (mean age: 75.75). The widows were all in relatively good health: 17 rated their health as 'excellent,' 15 as 'good' and 8 as 'fair.' None of the widows rated their health as 'poor.'

Education. Level of educational attainment was considerably higher for the larger community group: the range of years completed in school was from 11 to 18 years. Years of completed schooling for the women in the rural community ranged from 4 to 15. Almost half of the sample in the rural community had an eighth grade education or less; whereas, all of the women in the larger community had at least 11 years or more education.

Income. Besides the difference in educational attainment, there was considerable difference in current annual income between the two groups.

The median for the larger community sample was $8,500, while the median current annual income for the rural community sample was $4,500.

Length of Residence. Length of residence in the larger town ranged from 3 to 67 years (mean: 39.05 years). Length of residence for the small rural town widows ranged from 6 to 80 years (mean: 32.65 years).

Length of Widowhood. Length of widowhood for the larger community sample ranged from 1 to 42 years, with a mean of 14.25 years. In the rural community, length of widowhood ranged from 3 to 30 years with a mean of 11.9 years.

Significant Others. All the significant others interviewed resided in the same community and all were females. The widows were given the choice of naming male significant others such as family members, co-workers, or friends. However, none chose to do so even after intensive probing in some cases. The widows who resided in the same household with a son were, in fact, given the option of naming that son as a significant other, but none of the widows did so. The only family members named as significant others were one sister of a widow (who lived with her) in the larger community and one sister in the rural community who did not live with the widow. The average age of the 52 significant others in the larger community was 70.52. The average age of the 30 significant others in the rural community was 64.0.

Among the significant others named by the women in the larger town, twenty-five were widowed, seventeen were married, nine were single and one was divorced. In the rural community, twelve were widowed, thirteen were married and five were single. The average length of time the larger community significant others knew the widows was 27.21 years, with the range being from

1 to 78 years. In the rural community the average length of time the significant others knew the widows was 29.56 years, with the range being from 2 to 70 years.

Data Analyses

As part of a larger survey, the widows and their significant others were asked for demographic and interactional information. Demographic information included age, sex, marital status and residential location of each significant other.

The dependent variables included frequency of social contacts and perceived emotional closeness between the significant other and the widow. On a six-point scale, each significant other was asked how often they visited, talked on the telephone, wrote, and went places with the widow. Responses ranged from: (1) "every day," to (6) "never." Additionally, the significant other was asked how emotionally close they felt toward the widow. Based on an ordinal scale, responses ranged from "very close" to "somewhat close."

Pearson (product-moment) correlations, chi-square values, and univariate frequencies were computed. Community comparisons were made using the results of these measures. The acceptable level of significance was $p \leq .05$.

Difference of mean scores and an index of agreement were computed between the significant others' ratings of intimacy toward the widow and the reciprocal widows' ratings of intimacy toward the significant others' based on the Weiss Intimacy Rating Scale (Weiss, Note 2).

Results

Table 1 lists the frequencies and per cent frequencies of specific social interactions according to the feelings of emotional closness of the significant others toward the widows. As indicated in Table 1, there seems to be a higher degree of visiting reported by the significant others in the rural community than in the larger community, though both have very high levels of visiting. While the significant others in the larger community reported feeling a slightly greater degree of emotional closeness, the difference was not significant. There was a greater degree of interaction through "talking on the telephone" between significant others and widows in the rural community than in the larger town, with both reporting high levels of this type of interaction. As would be expected, there was hardly any "writing" activity reported by the significant others in either community. The reported degree of social interaction through "going places" with the widow was higher in the larger town than in the rural community, though the difference was not statistically significant. It is clear that the types of interaction most reported in each community represents, to some degree, the character of the community with more "places to go" in the larger town.

Pearson r correlations were computed for the frequencies of specific social interactions of the significant others in the two communities in relation to their feelings of emotional closeness to the widow. For the rural community significant others, none of the specific social interactions correlated significantly with their feelings of emotional closeness ("visit", $r = .03$; "phone", $r = -.13$; "go places", $r = .16$). The specific social interaction of "write" could not be correlated because of the very small amount of this mode of interaction.

For the larger town's significant others, the correlation of feelings of emotional closeness with "visiting" ($r = .36$), "going places" ($r = .32$) were statistically significant (all p's $\leq .05$).

These results tend to indicate that the widow's social world in the larger community was largely built around friends (in part because of the small number of kin in the community) while the widow's social world in the rural community may have been more strongly oriented to family members residing there.

Table 2 reports the test of the difference of mean scores and the index of agreement between the widow's ratings of intimacy toward their significant others and the reciprocal significant others' ratings of intimacy toward the widows based on the Weiss Intimacy Rating Scale. The results show that there is no significant difference in either the overall mean scores of the two groups or the Pearson r correlation between the two group's ratings of intimacy.

Table 3 reports the same data for the rural group. While there is no significant difference in the correlation between the two group's ratings of intimacy, the overall difference in mean scores between the two group's ratings of intimacy (6.77 for widows and 7.63 for significant others) are statistically significant (t-value = -2.32, $p \leq .05$). The significant others intimacy ratings of the widows is higher than the widows reciprocal intimacy rating of their significant others. This finding seems to reflect the importance of a larger informal family support network and the greater reliance on family members in the rural community.

Discussion

It should be noted that older American widowed women residing in a specific Midwestern locale were included in the study. Thus, the reader is cautioned about the generalizability of the findings because of the limited and specific nature of the sample.

While the findings on the widows' immediate significant other groups were presented in terms of the demographic and social interactional characteristics, it should be emphasized that the social support networks of the widow do not operate in a formal fashion, but from day-to-day, in a fluid process, and, many times, conjointly with one another.

From the interviews, the role of significant others as a source of support was much more clear-cut in the small town (due perhaps to fewer kin available in the community), leading to the conclusion that assistance in a variety of forms is needed by the widow. On the one hand, it may be that she needs immediate help from someone living in close proximity to her. In this case the significant other may play an important social support role for her. On the other hand, she may, over the long run, need advice or assistance that only family and kin can provide. If these family members are not immediately available, the nature of the assistance does not necessarily demand immediate action, thus allowing the widow time to consult with her family when it is more convenient.

Besides helping to alleviate the immediate needs of the widow, significant others who live in the community serve as a source of social companionship that the family, regardless of their proximity to the widow, cannot

offer as a comparable substitute. Arling (1976) explains:

> . . . these relationships are based upon common interests and lifestyles, while the elderly widow's family ties may be marked by dissimilar concerns and interests. Moreover, friendship normally develops voluntarily and is characterized by an equal ability to exchange assistance. The family bond in old age may result in a sense of formal obligation, role-reversal between elderly parent and adult child, and dependency (p. 757).

As suggested, significant others can be as important to older people as their kinship relationships. It should be stressed that while the widow's friendship networks may extend outside the community, and most often do, we are addressing issues primarily of informal social support provided by the widow's intra-community support systems.

In many instances, close friends and significant others supercede family members in order of salience for the older person's social life. As with all other social relationships, older persons tend to retain friends from middle age rather than beginning and cultivating new friendships, especially close or intimate friendships, in old age. However, the widows of both communities in this study estimated that in the past year they had cultivated an average of five or more new friends, even though they reported an average length of friendship with significant others of over 25 years duration. This suggests that widowhood opens up time and availability structures not present during marriage that allow the widow

to develop and re-initiate old, as well as to cultivate new, friends.

There exists some evidence that, regardless of how many close friends older people have, they are fairly restrictive in terms of whom they will accept as close friends. Generally, they tend to have friends of similar age, sex, marital and socio-economic status (Riley and Foner, 1968). For the most part, this holds true in the findings of this study: all significant others named in this study were female and approximately the same age as the respondent. In both communities the majority of significant others were also widows, lending validity to the notion that the older widow has a "society of widows" with whom she can find companionship and replace some of the lost social content of her life.

The fact that the widows were not inclined to cite family members as significant others may indicate that a semantic distinction between family members and significant others exists for the widows. Perhaps significant others are considered, and defined, as close friends who are not related to the widow. Thus, family members may be close and technically 'significant' for the widow but were not defined as such in this study.

Some studies report there is no sex difference in friendship relationships among the elderly -- that both elderly men and women lose friends with age (Shanas, 1962; Powers, Keith and Goudy, 1975). Other research concludes that there is a difference in the friendship patterns of older men and women. Blau (1961) found that friendships of older widows are discontinued when their status similarity is disrupted, so that those in

a circle who are first widowed are quietly dropped by their friends until they themselves become widowed. This suggests that the widows' social integration may be governed less by her individual attributes than by how these attributes correspond with the characteristics of the social arrangements around her.

Five widows in the rural community did not cite any significant others. Since over half of the older widowed women in the rural community were interviewed these five women represent twenty-five percent of the older widowed women there. Viewed in these terms the number of women in the rural community not citing any significant others becomes much more pronounced. These may be truly isolated older widowed women from both a social as well as a geographical standpoint.

The literature indicates that there is certainly a difference in how men and women perceive friendship. Clark and Anderson (1967) stated that older women seem to have more "friends" but that older men have "associates." Women appear to speak more often about their friendships, place greater value on them and tend to depend more on their friends than do elderly men. Generally, men tend to be passive about their friendships, in part, because many more men are married than women and have less need for friends as a source of primary ties. Men tend to correspond less and so lose contact with friends more than women (Clark and Anderson, 1967).

Social class factors are important for forming and maintaining friendships in widowhood because people of similar class positions have similar means and lifestyles. Generally, they are likely to have the common interests,

tastes and general beliefs and perspectives upon which friendship is based (Blau, 1973).

The present study, while it did not concentrate on socioeconomic differences, concludes that social class and the socioeconomic resources available make considerable differences in the widow's processes of social reconstruction. The socioeconomic differences between the small town and the rural community widows certainly account for many disparities in the general lifestyles of the two groups.

Working class men make friends on the job with those of similar age with whom social ties can be strengthened or renewed when they are widowed. On the other hand, social life for a working class widow becomes narrower after the death of her husband (Blau, 1973). Middle class women have more friends with whom they have previously shared social life with their husbands (Lopata, 1973). Unlike either working or middle class women, upper-class women are more likely to involve themselves in extensive association with other women throughout their married lives. Over the years, they accumulate a relatively wide social circle of friends and acquaintances over a wide geographical area. To be sure, their participation in friendship activities may become more limited as they grow older, but, after they have overcome the first shock of grief, upper-class widows begin to re-establish closer ties with old friends, particularly other widows like themselves who also seek social companionship (Lopata, 1973; Gibbs, 1978).

The widows in the present study were for the most part working and lower-middle class in background. On the whole, their long length of residence and embeddedness in the community was conducive to the establishment or re-establishment of adequate social support in widowhood. Indeed, many widows felt a profound sense of loyalty and satisfaction in the social content of their lives because of their deep-seated moorings in the community.

Lastly, the present research has demonstrated that there are important community differences even within what are considered to be similar categories of communities. (Despite the large difference in their sizes, both of the study communities are technically designated as 'non-metropolitan'). Studies of similar and contrasting community types, as well as regional variations of location of communities, would be most helpful in the future. The use of "social systems" and "interactional" methods would be useful in analyzing communities as units of social organization. It would also be useful and important to conduct future widowhood research with minority widows (and widowers) in various communities contexts.

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TABLE 1. FREQUENCY AND PER CENT FREQUENCY OF SPECIFIC SOCIAL INTERACTIONS CORRELATED WITH FEELINGS OF EMOTIONAL CLOSENESS OF SMALL TOWN AND RURAL COMMUNITY SIGNIFICANT OTHERS WITH WIDOWS.[1]

TYPE AND FREQUENCY OF SOCIAL INTERACTIONS	SMALL TOWN (n=52) Feeling of Emotional Closeness				RURAL COMMUNITY (n=30) Feeling of Emotional Closeness			
	VERY CLOSE	CLOSE	SOMEWHAT CLOSE	TOTALS	VERY CLOSE	CLOSE	SOMEWHAT CLOSE	TOTALS
VISIT:*								
H	24 (46.2)	9 (17.3)	6 (11.5)	39 (75.0)	11 (36.7)	12 (40.0)	3 (10.0)	26 (86.7)
M	3 (5.8)	5 (9.6)	2 (3.8)	10 (19.2)	1 (3.3)	3 (10.0)	0	4 (13.3)
L	0	1 (1.9)	2 (3.8)	3 (5.8)	0	0	0	0
TOTALS	27 (51.9)	15 (28.8)	10 (19.2)	52 (100.0)	12 (40.0)	15 (50.0)	3 (10.0)	30 (100.0)
PHONE:**								
H	21 (40.4)	9 (17.3)	6 (11.5)	36 (69.2)	9 (30.0)	14 (46.7)	2 (6.7)	25 (83.3)
M	5 (9.6)	4 (7.7)	4 (7.7)	13 (25.0)	2 (6.7)	1 (3.3)	1 (3.3)	4 (13.3)
L	1 (1.9)	2 (3.8)	0	3 (5.8)	1 (3.3)	0	0	1 (3.3)
TOTALS	27 (51.9)	15 (28.8)	10 (19.2)	52 (100.0)	12 (40.0)	15 (50.0)	3 (10.0)	30 (100.0)
WRITE:***								
H	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
M	0	0	2 (3.8)	2 (3.8)	0	0	0	0
L	27 (51.9)	15 (28.8)	8 (15.4)	50 (96.2)	12 (40.0)	15 (50.0)	3 (10.0)	30 (100.0)
TOTALS	27 (51.9)	15 (28.8)	10 (19.2)	52 (100.0)	12 (40.0)	15 (50.0)	3 (10.0)	30 (100.0)
GO PLACES:****								
H	19 (36.5)	8 (15.4)	4 (7.7)	31 (59.6)	6 (20.0)	6 (20.0)	1 (3.3)	13 (43.3)
M	8 (15.4)	4 (7.7)	4 (7.7)	16 (30.8)	6 (20.0)	6 (20.0)	2 (6.7)	14 (46.7)
L	0	3 (5.8)	2 (3.8)	5 (9.6)	0	3 (10.0)	0	3 (10.0)
TOTALS	27 (51.9)	15 (28.8)	10 (19.2)	52 (100.0)	12 (40.0)	15 (50.0)	3 (10.0)	30 (100.0)

[1] Feelings of Emotional Closeness and Frequency of Interaction Scores are based on ordinal response scales

*X^2 = 2.20, 2 d.f., = n.s. (frequency of "visit" - town vs. rural).
**X^2 = 2.01, 2 d.f., = n.s. (frequency of "phone" - town vs. rural).
***X^2 = 1.43, 1 d.f., = n.s. (frequency of "write" - town vs. rural).
****X^2 = 2.24, 2 d.f., = n.s. (frequency of "go places" - town vs. rural).

TABLE 2 TEST OF DIFFERENCE OF MEANS AND INDEX OF AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE SMALL TOWN'S WIDOWS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANT OTHER'S RATINGS OF INTIMACY ON THE WEISS INTIMACY RATING SCALE (W.I.R.)

Variable	Number Of Cases	Mean	t Value	Degrees Of Freedom	2-Tail Probability	Standard Deviation	Standard Error	Pearson r Corr.	2-Tail Probability
Widows' W.I.R. Score	52	6.9231	1.28	51	.206 n.s.	1.506	.209	.032	.825 n.s.
Sig. Others' W.I.R. Score		6.4808				2.034	.282		

TABLE 3 TEST OF DIFFERENCE OF MEANS AND INDEX OF AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE RURAL COMMUNITY'S WIDOW SIGNIFICANT OTHER'S RATINGS OF INTIMACY ON THE WEISS INTIMACY RATING SCALE (W.I.R.)

Variable	Number Of Cases	Mean	t Value	Degrees Of Freedom	2-Tail Probability	Standard Deviation	Standard Error	Pearson r Corr.	2-Tail Probability
Widows' W.I.R. Score	30	6.7667	-2.32	29	.028 ($p \leq .05$)	1.736	.317	.57	.763 n.s.
Sig. Others' W.I.R. Score		7.6333				1.189	.217		